Absentee Ballot Best Practices

Montana Secretary of State Linda McCulloch
Elections and Government Services Division
Sos.mt.gov   soselections@mt.gov

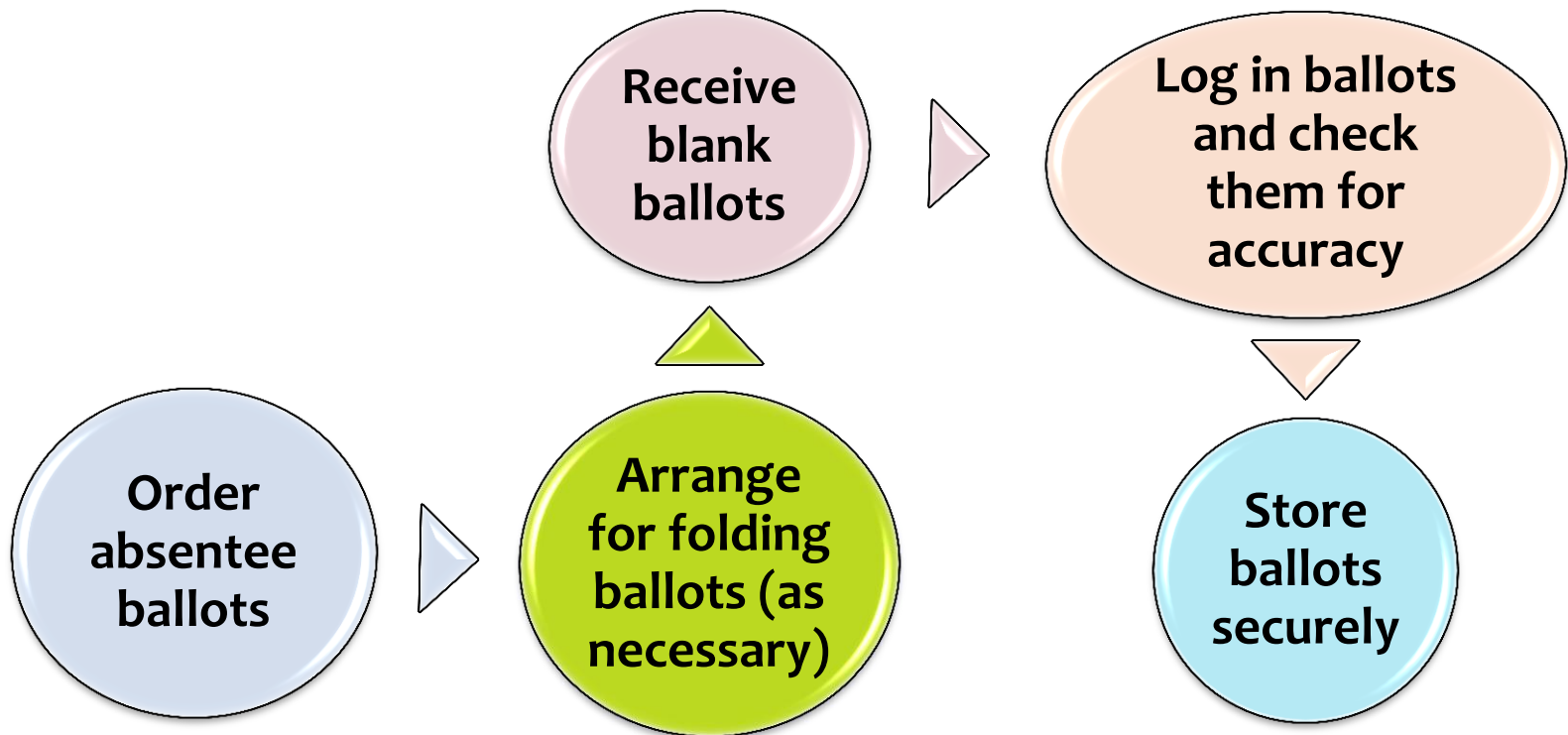**2014 Election Official Certification Training**

February 2014

Regarding Statutory Requirements

* **This presentation is not intended to repeat statutory requirements, since all such requirements are available in Title 13.**

* **The purpose of this training is to suggest and discuss absentee best practices.**

Absentee Flow Chart 1 (ordering, receipt and storage)

Order absentee ballots → Arrange for folding ballots (as necessary) → Receive blank ballots → Log in ballots and check them for accuracy → Store ballots securely

Ordering Ballots

* **When ordering ballots you must:**
    * **Provide each election precinct with sufficient ballots for:**
        * **currently registered electors**
        * **late registrants**
    * **Provide an extra supply to cover replacement ballots for destroyed, spoiled, lost and not received ballots.**

Ordering Ballots

* **There are several reasons for ordering more ballots than your number of registered voters:**
  * **Election officials are prohibited from putting labels on ballots and from issuing labels to electors; they have to issue replacement ballots.**

Ordering Ballots

* **There are several reasons for ordering more ballots than your number of registered voters (continued):**

    - **Late registrants are not necessarily registered at the time that you order ballots.**

    - **Certain groups advise voters to go to the polling place and request polling place ballots, even if those voters have received an absentee ballot.**

Ordering Ballots

* **This is how Missoula County orders ballots:**
  - **100 % of active, inactive etc. + additional 25%.**
    - **Ballots cost about 12-15 cents per ballot**
  - **Missoula County orders a separate amount for Resolution Ballots and AutoMark Ballots – see spreadsheet as a demonstration.**

Ordering Ballots

SEQ	PCT	# ACTIVE VOTERS	# INACT VOTERS	# PROV VOTERS	TOTAL + 30%	TEST	PRINT	RESOL	NO STUB AUTO MARK	# ABSENT VOTERS	NUMBER ABSENTEE	NUMBER WAREHSE	NUMBER RESOL	COMMENTS
NOVEMBER 6, 2012 BALLOT PRINT										FOLD ABSENTEES				
1-1	BONNER 1	1068	459	4	1990	25	2015	153	17	486	1-995	996-1990	1-153	
1-2	BONNER 1+FIRE	203	46	0	324	25	349	25	17	109	1-162	163-324	1-25	
2-1	BONNER 2	125	51	1	230	25	255	18	17	47	1-115	116-230	1-18	
2-2	BONNER 2+FIRE	12	3	0	20	25	45	2	17	9	1-10	11-20	1-2	
3	CHIEFCHL 1	1305	501	7	2357	25	2382	181	17	669	1-1179	1180-2357	1-181	
4	CLINTON 1	1069	361	0	1859	25	1884	143	17	474	1-930	931-1859	1-143	
5	COLDSPRG 1	91	14	0	137	25	162	11	17	59	1-69	70-137	1-11	
6	COLDSPRG 2	1380	467	1	2402	25	2427	185	17	668	1-1201	1202-2402	1-185	
7	COLDSPRG 3	1296	327	3	2114	25	2139	163	17	712	1-1057	1058-2114	1-163	
8	CSPORTER 1	1698	898	16	3396	25	3421	261	17	1002	1-1698	1699-3396	1-261	
9	CSPORTER 2	386	152	0	699	25	724	54	17	167	1-350	351-699	1-54	
10-1	E MSLA 1	209	84	2	384	25	409	30	17	132	1-192	193-384	1-30	
10-2	E MSLA 1+FIRE	827	363	5	1554	25	1579	120	17	305	1-777	778-1554	1-120	
11	E MSLA FIRE ONLY				100	25	125	10	17		1-50	51-100	1-10	

Folding Ballots

* **Tips for Scanning Folded Ballots:**
  1. Ask the printer to use a microperf on stubs
  2. Back bend ballots at each fold. Gently fold the paper the opposite direction of its fold. Avoid hard creases when folding the ballot
  3. Rolling the stack of ballots lengthwise can also be helpful
  4. Work with small stacks when scanning

Folding Ballots

* **Tips for Scanning Folded Ballots:**
    5. Jog your ballots (M650 or DS850)
    6. Clean the scanner of ballot debris every few thousand ballots
    7. Keep ballots stored in a temperature/humidity controlled environment
    8. If possible, weigh them down with something flat and heavy

Folding Ballots

* **Ballots need to be folded so the top of the ballot is going "down the valley."**

* **Ballots need to be carefully folded so there isn't a fold on the coding.**

* **If using a vendor, direct vendor not to do a hard fold but a soft fold; the harder the fold the higher chance you have of coding being scarred.**

* **If folding ballots yourself, consult with tabulator vendor on how and where to fold ballots.**

Folding Ballots

* **Precinct Tabulators: M100 and DS200**
  - Scan in any orientation (upside down, back to front, etc.)
* **Central Tabulators:**
  - **M650**
    - ➤ Nest ballots together
    - ➤ Single orientation w/ corner cut in the upper right corner
    - ➤ Scan small stacks: 50-100 ballots
  - **DS850**
    - ➤ Nest ballots together
    - ➤ Any orientation
    - ➤ Start with small stacks: 100 ballots
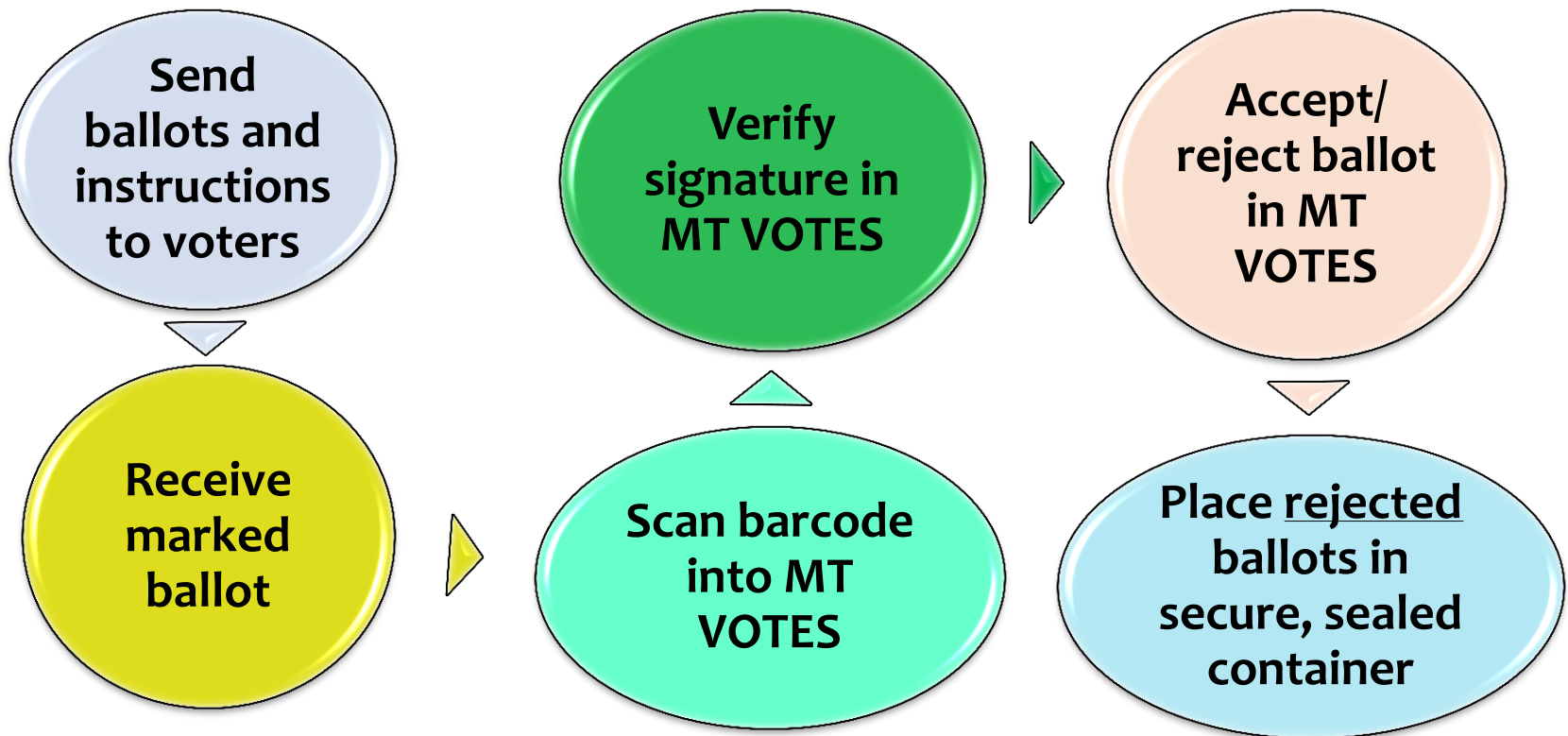
Handling Ballots After Receipt from Vendor

* After you receive ballots from your vendor, sort ballots in precinct order and in precinct split order

* Check to make sure all ballots are accounted for

* Verify ballot faces by comparing to the final proof you signed off on

* Physically pull absentee ballots to prepare for absentee voting

Ballot Security Before Election Day

* **Ballots to be used at polling places need to be sealed (use Ballot Seal Log) with Ballot Certification Report form enclosed, until election morning.**

* **The ballots should be stored in a dry secure location with limited access.**

Absentee Flow Chart 2 (sending, receiving, rejecting*)

*See next flow chart for processing accepted ballots

Send ballots and instructions to voters

Receive marked ballot

Scan barcode into MT VOTES

Verify signature in MT VOTES

Accept/ reject ballot in MT VOTES

Place rejected ballots in secure, sealed container

Providing Ballots to Electors

* **Electors who come into your office to apply for and request absentee ballots, after ballots are printed, should be given ballots.**

* **Absentee ballots must be sent to absent military and overseas electors as soon as ballots are printed and no later than 46 days before the election.**

    ▪ **This is verified and strictly enforced by US DOJ.**

Providing Ballots to Electors

* **Other electors should be mailed ballots on the 30th day before election day (never earlier than the 30th day).**
  - **If absentee ballots are already sent when electors change/update registration, the county that sent the original ballot has to void the ballot before the registration can be processed and a new ballot issued.**

Providing Ballots to Electors

* **USPS**
  * **Recommendations:**
    * **Meet with Post Office personnel and/or Mail Service Company at least one month prior to mailing**
    * **Make sure envelopes meet USPS requirements**

Providing Ballots to Electors

* **USPS**
  * **Recommendations:**
    * ➤ **Inform them of the number of ballots being mailed**
    * ➤ **Remind them how critical it is to receive back undeliverable ballots as soon as possible**
    * ➤ **Discuss specific cost effective measures**

Ballot Instructions

* **In order to maintain uniformity, counties are advised to use the prescribed absentee instructions:**
    * **Minor variations may be necessary, especially based on county-specific considerations.**
    * **For major variations, please consult SOS.**
* **Be sure to read the instructions to ensure that they are applicable, clear and concise.**
* **Ensure that instructions specify the accurate amount of postage needed to return the marked ballot.**

Receiving Ballots from Electors

* **Missoula Co labels every mail tray with an inventory slip**
    * **For example: Tray 1 of 8, the # of ballots enclosed, sort by groups of 25**
    * **Mail & In-person batches are kept separate**
        * **When entering batches into MT VOTES you need to select mail, in-person, etc.; keeping the mail and in-person batches separate ensures that you do not have to change the source in MT VOTES for each ballot.**

Receiving Ballots from Electors

* **Prepare envelopes so signatures are visible (keeping them in groups of 25)**

* **Scan bar code – batch should equal 25**

* **Also, undeliverable ballots are in batches of 25. Filing the undeliverable ballots by batch # eliminates the need to alphabetize undeliverables for retrievables.**

Daily Absentee Ballot Reconciliation

* **In order to conduct daily absentee ballot reconciliation, compare accepted envelopes with the BP34 report from MT VOTES and fill out portion 1 or A of the reconciliation form.**

* **Make a copy of the reconciliation form and seal the original with the secrecy envelopes.**

Daily Absentee Ballot Reconciliation

Absentee/Mail Ballot Reconciliation Form

Part I to be completed for each precinct on a daily basis, or as necessary. EA keeps one copy with the BP-34 report attached, and a copy is sealed with secrecy envelopes and stays with ballots until counted/tabulated.

Ballot Style or Precinct #_____

Election: _____ Election Date: _____

PART I (AFFIRMATION BOARD*)

1. Total number of Affirmation Envelopes Returned   _____
   Less Military/Overseas Ballots (fax or email)   _____
   Less Rejected Ballots (must note on reject affirmation log)   _____
2. Number of Secrecy Envelopes   * [   ]

JUDGE SIGNATURES: Date & Time:_____

X_____   X_____

Make a copy of report after Part I and attach BP-34 Report to copy.
****

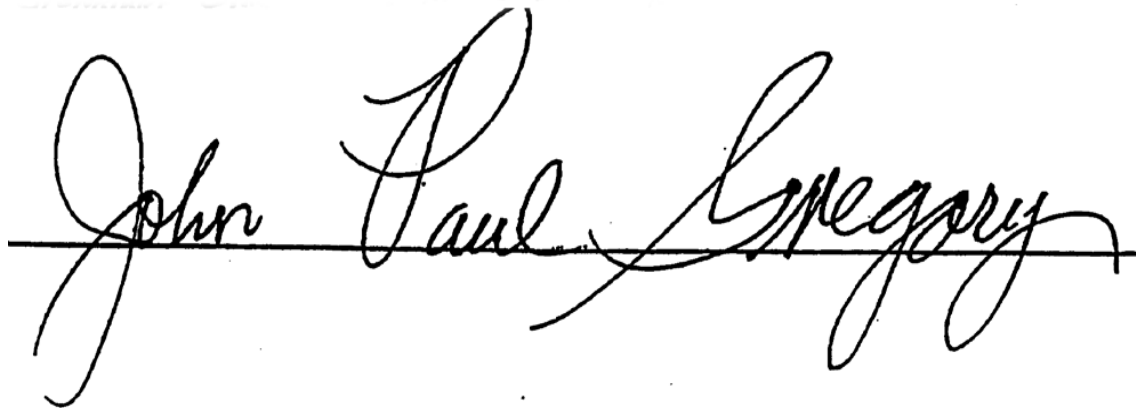**PART II (SEQUESTERED OR COUNTING BOARD)**

Signature Verification

* **Next step is to verify signatures.**

* **In MT VOTES, select Verify on batch management or use the F12 key on the home screen for the voter**

* **Also in MT VOTES, set up trained individuals who are responsible to verify signatures.**

* **Set up procedures for the ballots they reject.**

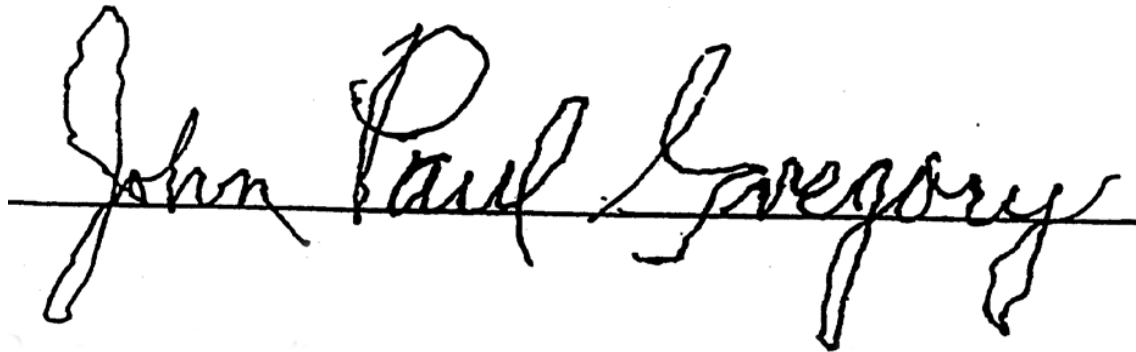 ▪ **Have someone responsible for reviewing all rejected signatures.**

Signature Verification

* **Review all signatures using the following criteria:**
  - **capital letters match**
  - **letters tail off alike**
  - **letter spacing is the same**
  - **space between signature and the line is the same**
  - **beginning and ending of signature**
  - **the "t" crossing, "i" and "j" dotting, and letter strokes that drop below the line**
  - **pen pressure is the same**

Signature Verification Examples
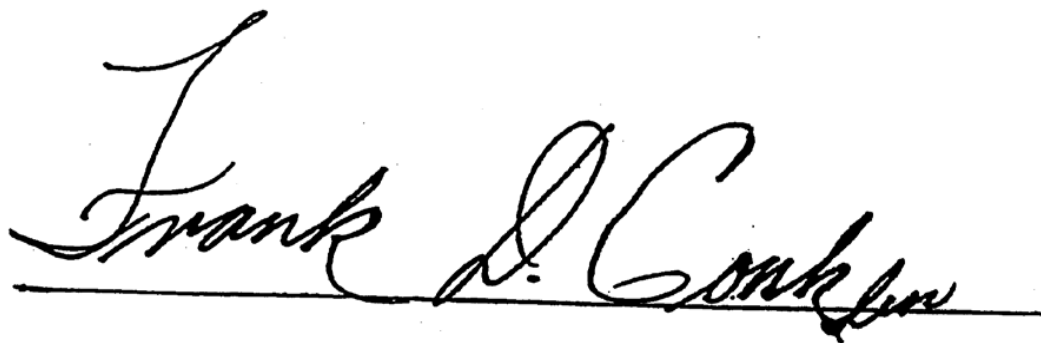
Signature Verification Examples

* Example Above: Signature change may have taken place because of age or other factors.
* If the change is extreme, recommend that the signer provide an updated voter registration form with the signer's most current signature.
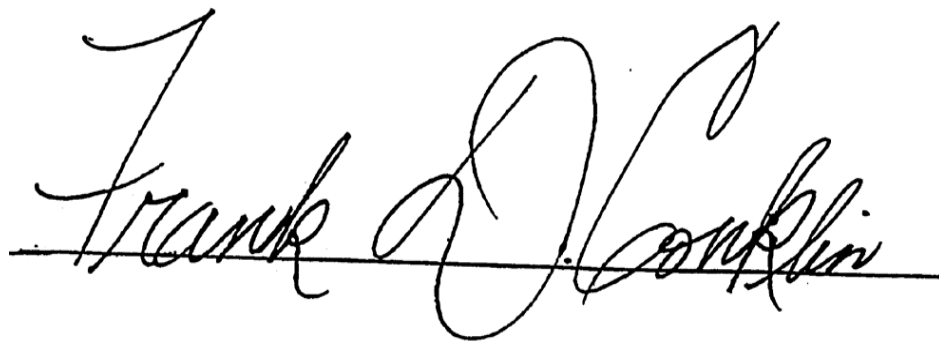
Signature Verification Examples

Original Signature

Comparison Signature
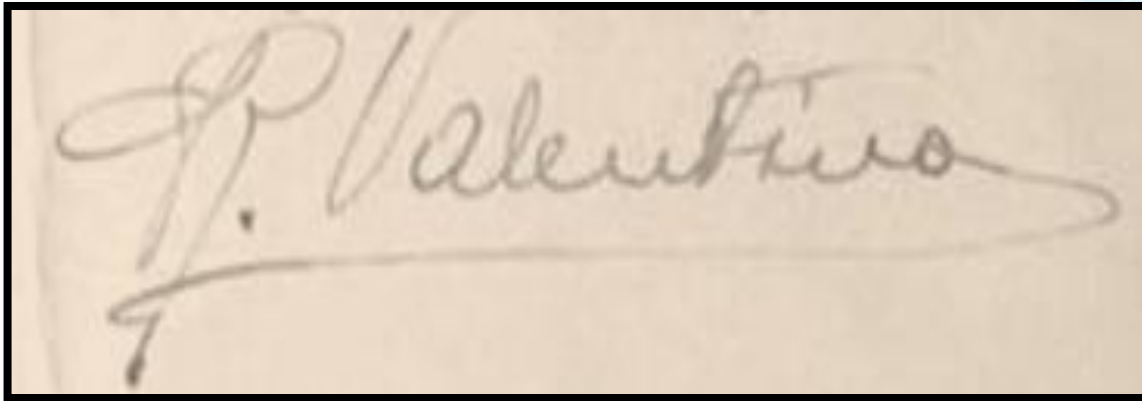
Signature Verification Examples

* **Example Above: The comparison signature may be a forgery. Pen pressure is different and several letters are different.**

* **You may wish to check registrations of other voters in the household with the second signature, to see if someone in the household signed instead.**

Signature Verification Examples

Original Signature

Comparison Signature

Signature Verification Examples

* **Example Above: This is a real-life example. The comparison signature is fake.**
  * **In the real signature, the "V" in Valentino is rounded and never pointed.**
  * **The "R" in Rudolph is much different as well.**
  * **The "pen pressure" appears to be different in the fake as well.**

Signature Verification

* **Before rejecting a signature view all signatures on file in MT Votes.**

    - **In Missoula County, officials check all the available signatures in MT VOTES, especially if the voter has a very old voter registration application on file.**
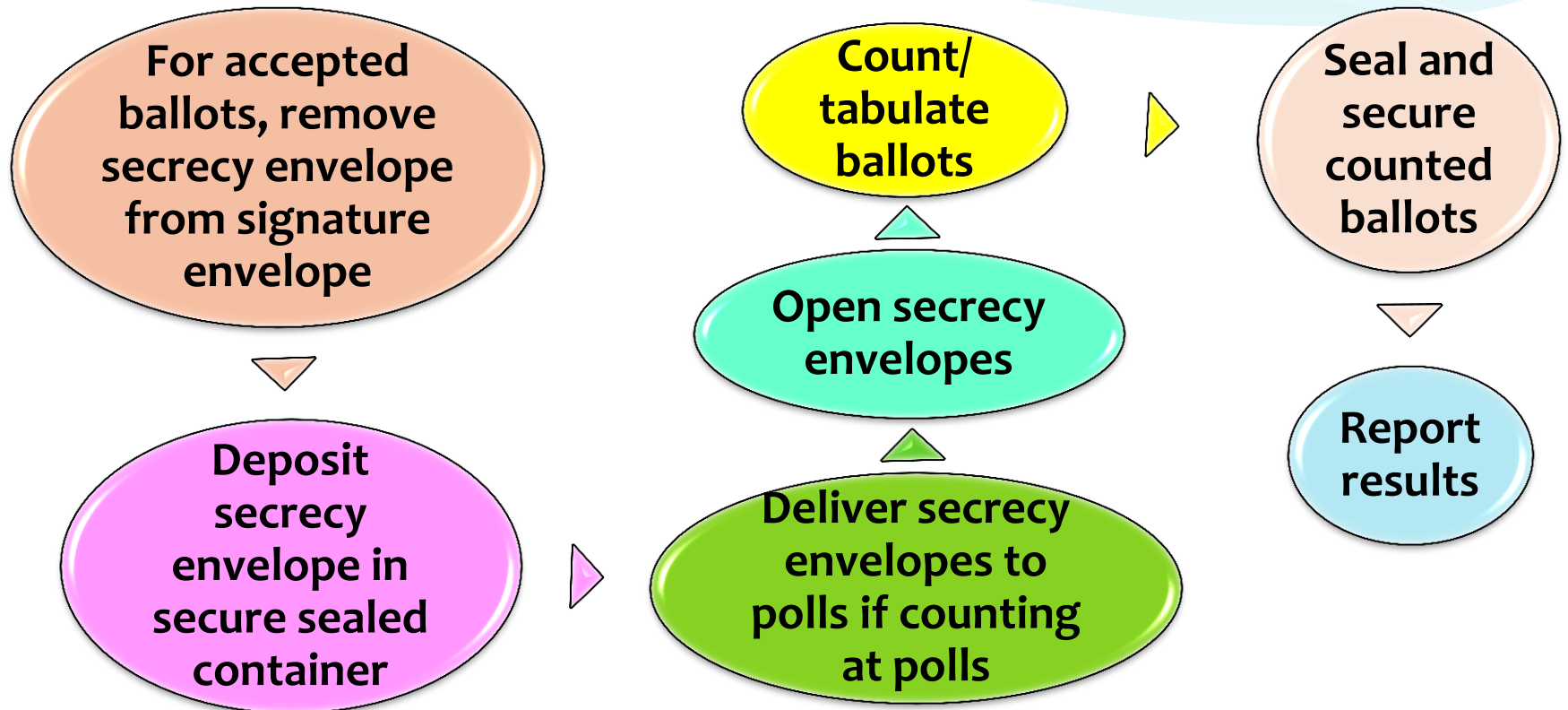
Ballot Rejection Determinations

* If a husband & wife signed each other's envelope, correct the label on the envelope and accept the ballots.

* Use previous precinct registers to verify signatures (as a backup if you aren't quite sure on a signature).
    * Be sure to use the VR application or Absentee Application as the final authority.

* Once all signature verification attempts have been exhausted and you still believe the signature is a mismatch, send "Verification of Signature" form to elector to resolve rejected ballot.

Securing Rejected Ballots

* **Keep them in alphabetical order and place them in a secure area unless and until they are resolved by, and provided to, the voter.**

* **After the election, rejected ballots that have not been resolved are entered into the Provisional Module pending resolution and are stored with the provisional ballots.**

Absentee Flow Chart 3
(after signature verification)

For accepted ballots, remove secrecy envelope from signature envelope

Deposit secrecy envelope in secure sealed container

Deliver secrecy envelopes to polls if counting at polls

Open secrecy envelopes

Count/ tabulate ballots

Seal and secure counted ballots

Report results

Opening Signature Envelopes to Remove Secrecy Envelopes

* **Some counties open signature envelopes to remove secrecy envelopes as soon as the signature is verified.**

* **Other counties open them on a daily or weekly schedule, and others wait until election day.**

* **For uniformity purposes, we recommend opening signature envelopes as soon as the signature is verified, or daily at the latest.**

Securing Secrecy Envelopes Until Election Day

* **The secrecy envelopes should be stored in a dry secure location with restricted access until early preparation or election day.**

Reconciling Secrecy Envelopes

* **Secrecy Envelopes need to be reconciled with the Absentee/Mail Ballot Daily Reconciliation report.**

  - *Missoula County asks early prep judges to complete Part II and then on Election Day, the sequestered board has to recount the # of ballots enclosed.*

  - *This verification process ensures that when the signature affirmation envelopes are reconciled, the # of secrecy envelopes agrees with what the report states was enclosed in the sealed container.*

Reconciling Secrecy Envelopes

* **During early preparation and/or on election day, open Secrecy Envelopes, remove ballot and count to make sure the # of ballots agree with the # of secrecy envelopes**

* **Place ballots with original reconciliation form (Part II signed by Early Prep judges) into a secure sealed container.**

* **Make a copy of the reconciliation form so that if someone did try to tamper, you have a copy of the reconciliation form that was enclosed with the ballots.**

Reconciling Secrecy Envelopes

Absentee/Mail Ballot Reconciliation Form

Part I to be completed for each precinct on a daily basis, or as necessary. EA keeps one copy with the BP-34 report attached, and a copy is sealed with secrecy envelopes and stays with ballots until counted/tabulated.

Ballot Style or Precinct #_____

Election: _____   Election Date: _____

PART I (AFFIRMATION BOARD*)

      1. Total number of Affirmation Envelopes Returned   _____
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            Less Rejected Ballots (must note on reject affirmation log)   _____
      2. Number of Secrecy Envelopes   *

JUDGE SIGNATURES: Date & Time:_____

X_____   X_____

Make a copy of report after Part I and attach BP-34 Report to copy.
****

PART II (SEQUESTERED OR COUNTING BOARD)

      3. Number of Secrecy Envelopes received   * _____

      4. Less rejected ballots (must note on rejected ballot log)   _____

      5. Total sent to Scanner/or hand   Page 1 _____ plus † Page 2 _____ =
           counted: †Use only if 2-page ballot

    * **Numbers Should Agree**

JUDGE SIGNATURES   Date & Time:_____

X_____   X_____

Early Preparation

* **Election officials can open secrecy envelopes *no earlier than* 1 business day before election day.**

* **In the presence of any person who requests to be present, an election official opens the secrecy envelope, removes and unfolds the ballot and without looking at the votes, places the ballot in a secured ballot box.**

  - **Ballots should be weighted down overnight to help flatten them for better machine tabulation.**

Early Preparation

* **Observers of early preparation should normally be not less than 10 feet or more than 20 feet from this early preparation, unless these distances are not feasible.**

* **Election officials preparing ballots under this section must sign an oath, securely seal ballot boxes and complete an early preparation reconciliation form.**
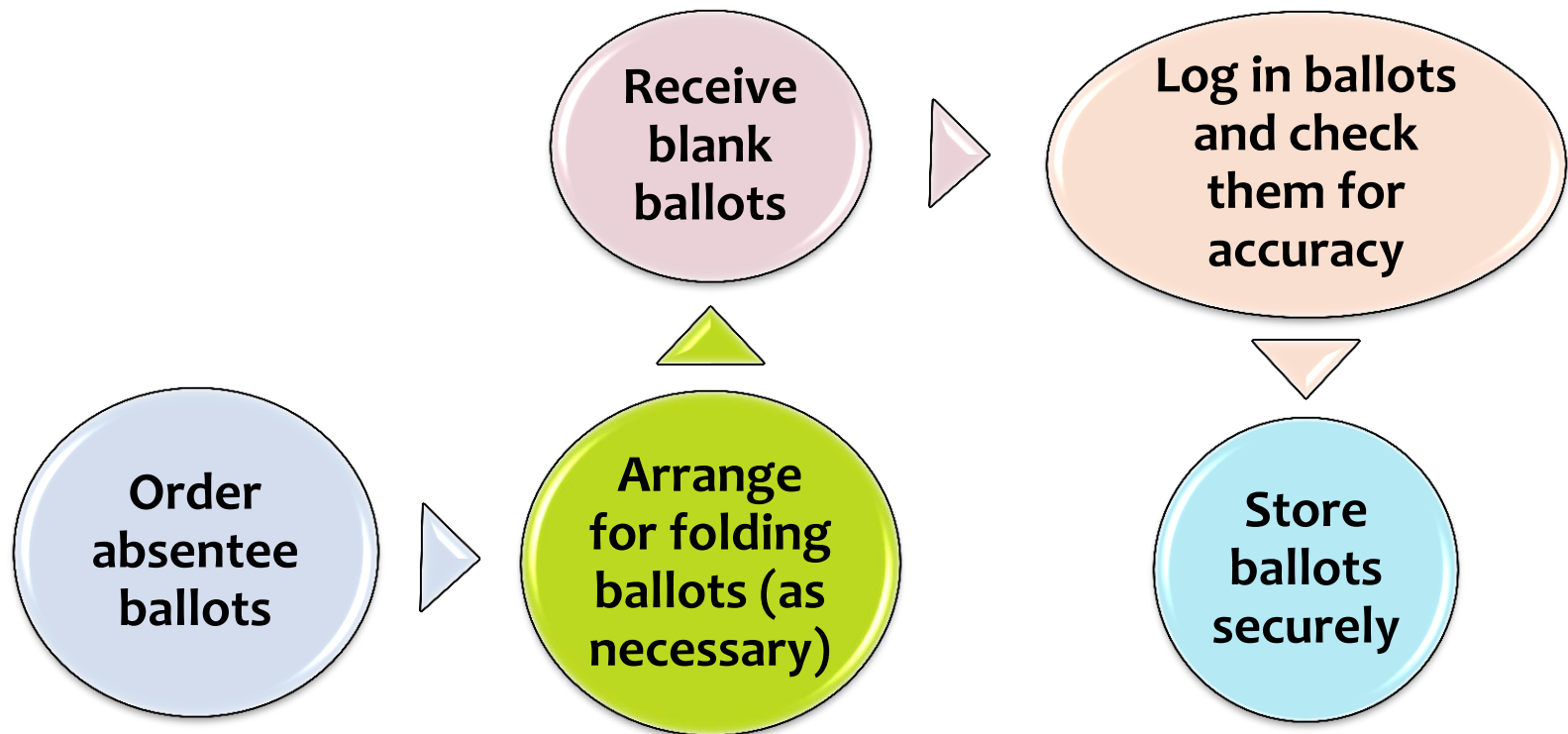
Finalizing Absentee Data

* **Please be sure to scan in your absentee undeliverable envelopes as soon as they come in, so that:**
    * **The SOS can get accurate absentee information, especially for UOCAVA voters; and**
    * **Voters are able to check My Voter Page and find out that their ballot is undeliverable.**
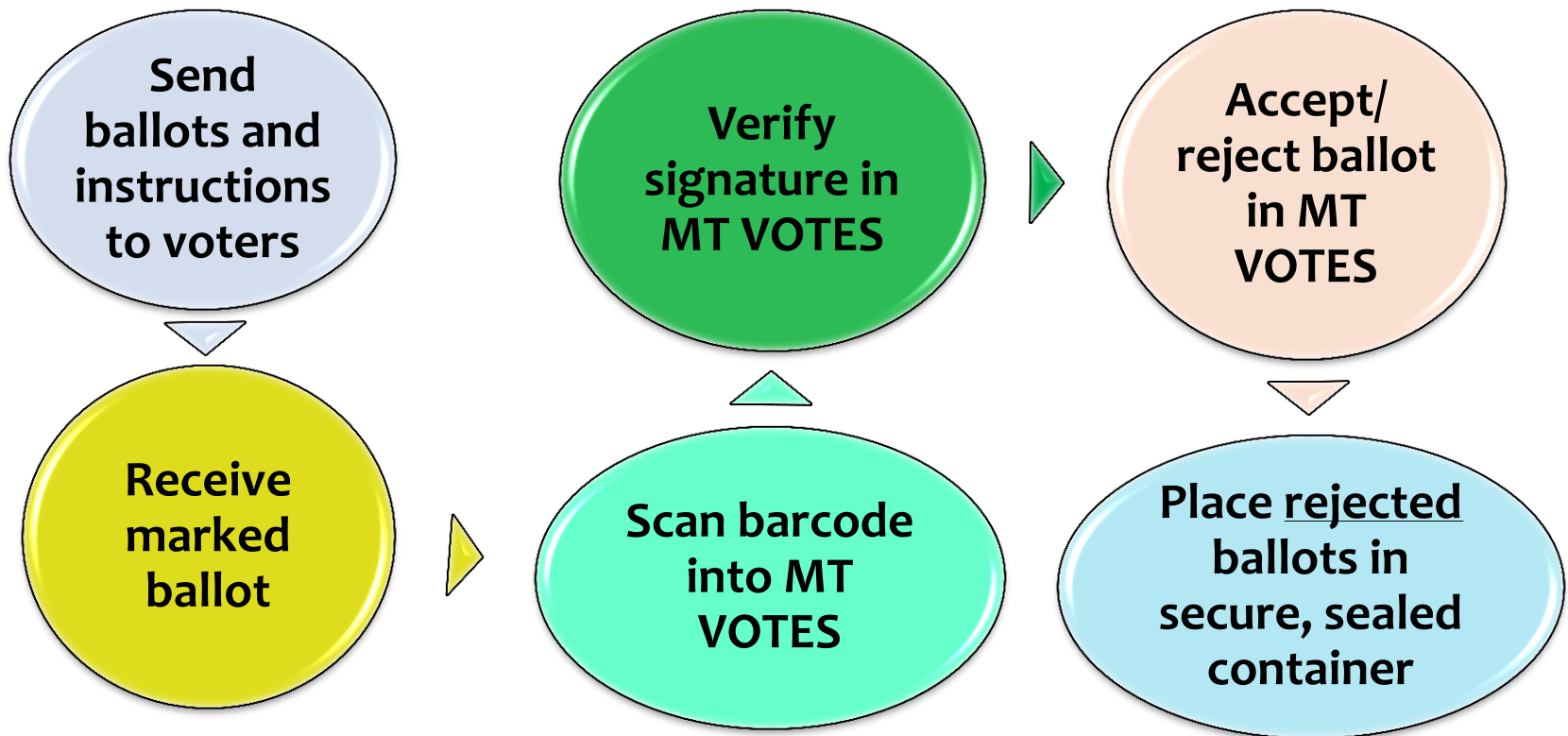* **Also scan any ballots that are received too late to count.**

Review

* **Each of the flow charts in this presentation are copied on the next three slides for easy reference.**

Absentee Flow Chart 1 (ordering, receipt and storage)

Order absentee ballots → Arrange for folding ballots (as necessary) → Receive blank ballots → Log in ballots and check them for accuracy → Store ballots securely

Absentee Flow Chart 2 (sending, receiving, rejecting)

Send ballots and instructions to voters

Receive marked ballot

Scan barcode into MT VOTES

Verify signature in MT VOTES

Accept/reject ballot in MT VOTES

Place rejected ballots in secure, sealed container

Absentee Flow Chart 3
(after signature verification)

For accepted ballots, remove secrecy envelope from signature envelope

↓

Deposit secrecy envelope in secure sealed container

▷

Deliver secrecy envelopes to polls if counting at polls

▲

Open secrecy envelopes

▲

Count/ tabulate ballots

▷

Seal and secure counted ballots

▽

Report results

Absentee FAQs

* 1) Can voters request an absentee ballot without stating a reason?

  ■ Yes. Since October 1, 1999, voters can request absentee ballots without specifying a reason and without having to be absent on election day.

Absentee FAQs

* **2) Once absent ballots are printed and available for issuance, do we have to provide them to people who come into our office to request them, even if they come in before the first day ballots are to be mailed?**

  * **Yes. (If they instead request to have the ballots mailed to them, mail them out the same day you mail your other absentee ballots.)**

Absentee FAQs

* **3) Can an interest group member mail a voter registration or absentee application in the same envelope as campaign literature if the envelope is marked to resemble a mailing from an election office?**

  ▪ **No. This is now specifically prohibited in law, 13-35-603.**

Absentee FAQs

* 4) Can an interest group mail, or advise an individual to mail a VR application or absentee application to any address other than the county EA's office?

    - No. This is also specifically prohibited in law, 13-35-604. However, the law does not prohibit an interest group member from taking such applications *in person* and submitting them to the election office.

Absentee FAQs

* 5) Can a member of an interest group pick up people's ballots at the election office in order to deliver them to voters?

  - Yes, an interest group member can pick up ballots as long as the voter signs a form stating that the person is authorized to do so, and the person has not already picked up ballots for four other electors.

Absentee FAQs

* 6) **Can a person from an interest group pick up ballots from voters and submit them?**

  ■ **Yes. Just as there is no prohibition on a family member dropping off ballots at the election office, there is no prohibition on interest groups doing so.**

  ■ **However, you may wish to warn voters about giving their ballots to people who they do not know.**

Absentee FAQs

* 7) Can an absentee voter come into the election office and get a new ballot after the voter's original absentee ballot has been submitted and received by the election office but not processed, for example if the voter changes his or her mind?

  ▪ No. Once a ballot is received by your office, it is considered under Montana law to be voted. Since electors cannot vote a ballot more than once, they cannot receive a replacement ballot in this situation.

Absentee FAQs

* 8) Are we allowed to do early preparation (removing the ballots from the secrecy envelopes) the weekend or week before the election?

  ■ No. Early preparation can only be done one (1) business day before election day. Please note that state law does not permit early preparation to be done for mail ballot elections.